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A sesquicentennial exhibition of historic garments and textile treasures

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An exhibition titled, “One Thread, Many Hands” was designed to celebrate the sesquicentennial celebration of a Midwestern university by highlighting the historic garments and textile treasures of a historic costume collection. The exhibition provided a unique opportunity to showcase one garment from each decade from the late 1850s to 2008 along with archival photographs. The exhibit was installed in a newly renovated and sustainable “green” gallery space. Our goals for the exhibition were to 1) emphasize the material culture of the state and the university, 2) to showcase the newly renovated, exhibition space, 3) to foster university and community relationships with the program and costume collection, and 4) to provide students the opportunity to participate in exhibition design and to view historic garments in a gallery setting. As the installation of the gallery progressed, we determined a fifth goal, to display the exhibition in a virtual, 3D manner. Our presentation will emphasize the decisions regarding the selection of the garments to best highlight the costume collection and gallery space and the ways in which the curators worked with the university community to promote the exhibition.

The garments in the exhibition represented the changing ideals and norms for women from the 1850s through 2008. The curators strove to present visually appealing pieces representative of each decade. We ensured that there was a mix of designer pieces including the work of Scaasi, Hattie Carnegie, Adele Simpson, and Claire McCardell and bequeathed garments from notable university officials. Challenges included finding pieces in good to excellent condition for a two-month display period that created a sense of continuity in the small gallery space and that physically fit the size 4 to 6 mannequins. Textiles selected demonstrated the breadth of the collection, including ethnic pieces from Africa, Asia, and Central America and accessories such as an Amelia Earhart-designed leather hat with propeller zipper. In keeping with the sesquicentennial theme, we also displayed university athletic wear with the newly redesigned school logo and a mascot from the 1980s. We selected photographs of students in the textiles and clothing program housed in the university archives dated from the 1880s to the 1970s. These images showed students drawing, designing, draping, and modeling garments. They were presented in such a way as to mirror the garments from the representative decades.

Promotional materials were developed announcing the exhibition and opening reception. Despite winter weather conditions of blowing snow and limited visibility, over 80 individuals



attended the opening reception from the university and the local community. Informal feedback from university administration, community members, and current and prospective students indicated the exhibition achieved the goals of showcasing and creating enthusiasm for both the gallery space and the historic costume collection. Students from various university classes, faculty, alumni, and the general public continue to visit “One Thread, Many Hands” for exhibition design, education, and inspiration. The response from visitors to the virtual exhibition has indicated greater knowledge of and visitation to the exhibition from those within and outside of the university community.